

Little Precossi, Stunted Becky: A Comparative Analysis of Child Hunger and National Body Health Discourses in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Children's Literature in Italian and English



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ABSTRACT

This article compares two children's literature classics, *Cuore* by Edmondo De Amicis (1886) and *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1905), an Italian text and an American/British text respectively. In my analysis, I apply a medical historical angle to the two novels, reading their images of malnourished and stunted children in the light of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western debate on child malnutrition and national discourse.

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1. A MEDICAL HISTORY-BASED TRANSNATIONAL COMPARISON: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON *CUORE* AND *A LITTLE PRINCESS*

Scholars of food in literature (Shahani; Humble) argue that the presence of food in a text is always powerfully charged with an array of social, cultural, and symbolic meanings; so, necessarily, are its absence and its consequences. Hunger and starvation are harrowing subjects and, when they are associated with childhood, the uncomfortable feelings they give rise to increase tenfold. Recent studies on food in children's literature (Daniel; Keeling and Pollard) address the almost obsessive discussion of hunger in this genre, where food may carry countless meanings and perform different functions simultaneously. In this article, I take a literary historical perspective on children's literature's engagement with child hunger debates, as they connect to discourses of class and nation. I focus on the discussion on child mal/nutrition that developed between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century in Western countries (that is, Europe and the United States), comparing the discourses it produced in different geographical and political contexts. Italy and Great Britain, the first a newborn country impoverished by civil war and the latter a wealthy colonial power, make an interesting comparative case in this context: despite their apparent differences, the child hunger and child nutrition discourses they developed were very similar. Furthermore, while in the period considered here British children's literature had reached its 'golden age', Italian children's literature was taking its first steps towards sophistication. However, in observing important examples of British and Italian children's literature produced in this period, I find they resonate with discourses related to the debate over child malnutrition and that the characters and themes connected to these discourses do present similarities. To illustrate my point, I compare Edmondo De Amicis's *Cuore* (1886), known in English as *Heart of a Boy*, and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905). These two children's novels are profoundly interested in issues of child mal/nutrition, health, and class. This is unsurprising, since both authors concerned themselves with these matters: De Amicis, a consumer of scientific and popular scientific publications, was conscious of child pathologies connected to malnutrition and supported the integration of physical education in school curricula to prevent physical malformations and rickets (Risso 170). Burnett, having been a poor child herself, supported the Drury Lane Boys' Club in London, a safe space for destitute children (Carpenter and Shirley 70). After her eldest son died of consumption in 1890, she also donated to and volunteered at different London institutions for the care of sick children (Carpenter and Shirley 80). The novels they authored reflect, I contend, discourses about child malnutrition and national/racial strength in circulation at the time in Great Britain and Italy.¹

My analysis provides a new perspective on the two novels by applying a medical historical angle to them. Reading them alongside popular medical publications, political texts, and research reports, this article increases our understanding of how the novels and their authors—two products of turn-of-the-century middle-class culture—engaged with child welfare debates that were relevant to the middle class, and with which the authors themselves were, to a degree, involved. This contributes to establishing realist children's novels as channels of circulation for discourses about children's health and children's positions in wider social and political debates; and it enhances our understanding of adult (since children's authors are usually adults) perceptions of children's positions in society. Burnett and De Amicis both belonged to the very same constituency—the middle class—that, in Great Britain as well as Italy, controlled both the children's literature market and discourses about child welfare, allowing us to appreciate how the discourse about child malnutrition, albeit nuanced according to local food landscapes, was a discourse that functioned in highly similar ways across nations.

2. CHILD HUNGER, BIOPOLITICS, AND MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In 1890, Dr Carlo Panizza published the results of an investigation conducted by Agostino Bertani, an Italian doctor and politician of radical and republican persuasion, on the life

¹ I use the term 'race' in this article in connection to its use in nineteenth-century scientific, anthropologic, and colonialist discourses, where it represents the idealized features of a nation's population; it does not reflect my own views on ethnic and cultural diversity. For an illustration of how the concept of race evolved in the nineteenth century, see Bernasconi.

conditions of the Italian country labourers, where he outlined the injurious effects of excessive work and malnutrition on young workers (Panizza 262–63). Bertani asked:

Quale forza, quale potenza è quella di un popolo, le cui masse si travagliano nella fame e si esauriscono nelle anemie, mentre la parte valida [...] porta altrove la sua forza, la sua vitalità, la sua energia, il suo lavoro? E questo deperimento della razza è giunto a tale che vera insipienza di Governo sarebbe il non preoccuparsene [...].

What strength, what power could a people have whose masses are starving and perishing of anaemia, while those who still can [...] take their strength, their vitality, their energy, their work elsewhere? And this degeneration of the race has reached such a point that ignoring it would truly be an example of misgovernment [...].

(Panizza 4–5)²

In 1907, Sir John Eldon Gorst, English Conservative politician of a Tory democratic orientation published *The Children of the Nation*, a book that discussed child malnutrition and its pernicious effects on the population. In his text he declared that “[to work a hungry and ailing child, either in body or mind] offends against the principles of humanity [...] it is unpatriotic, for it flings away an opportunity of securing that the coming race of Englishmen shall be strong and vigorous” (52).

Despite the seventeen-year gap between them, the geographical distance, and the different national and political contexts in which they were produced, Bertani’s and Gorst’s comments on malnutrition are remarkably similar. They both represent child hunger as a danger to the health and strength of the Italian and British people, as if they formed, each in their state, a whole unity, the ‘body’ of the nation. The concept of national body conflates in that system of ideologies and practices that Foucault defines *biopower*, or “power over life”.³ This could be roughly summarized as the control institutions exercise on how populations live and reproduce. The human body is the prime subject of this control, both intended as an ‘engine’ that should optimally perform its functions in society, and as a tool to ensure the continuation of the species through reproduction, in which guise the concept of ‘body’ extends to the whole nation (see, for example, Taylor 45). The period under analysis (late nineteenth and early twentieth century) was crucial for the development of dynamics that fall under the definition of biopower and biopolitics: as Darwin’s theory of evolution (1859) achieved international circulation, concerns emerged about the potential for human races to evolve or degenerate. When taken to extremes, as was the case with Social Darwinism and eugenics,⁴ reflections on these concerns led to suggestions that, in order to improve the race, measures should be taken to prevent the reproduction of bodies considered ‘defective’ (as in, disabled, weak, mentally ill, or morally exceptionable). Even when not inflected towards such extremes, the possibility of tweaking the national body to improve it and prevent degeneration was pursued with enthusiasm, including in Great Britain and Italy. Local and central governments, with the support of the medical profession, undertook measures that would ideally improve the population—ranging from inquests into the physical and economic state of the population to the introduction of physical education in schools.

Children, as future men and women charged with the perpetuation of a strong race, occupied a central position in these programmes. Historians regard the process of increasing medicalization of childhood that happened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a form of biopower (Hendrick 43; also, though they call it control, rather than biopower, Cambi and Olivieri 53–80), owing to its strong focus on regulating children’s bodies so that they would fulfil expectations

² All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

³ Foucault provides a definition of the term in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* and in his lectures at the Collège de France between 1975 and 1976 over the course *Society Must Be Defended*. For an overview of the concept and its implications, see Taylor 2014 and Oksala 2013.

⁴ Eugenics, a concept formulated by Charles Darwin’s cousin Francis Dalton, believed in the need to control reproduction to strengthen the ‘race’ by promoting breeding among the genetically (as in physically, intellectually, and morally) fit middle class and curbing it among the lower classes, whose high pace of reproduction caused concern because they were not viewed as fit and, therefore, were considered potentially threatening for the purity of the race. See Ledger (73–74). As for Social Darwinism, Claeys defines it as that variety of ideological stances that shared the “use of quasi-biological or organicist explanations of social evolution, class divisions and poverty, and racial and national stages of development” (228) and “the application of the idea of evolution to a higher social type on the basis of social competition between ‘fit’ and ‘unfit’ groups and individuals” (229).

about social and gender roles.⁵ Nutrition had a central role in this process. Dr Clement Dukes, physician at Rugby public school, in *The Essentials of School Diet* stressed the importance of correct nutrition to achieve “the highest state of growth and development in the youth of both sexes” and “the production of the finest specimens of the race” (viii). Similarly, Dr Secondo Laura in Italy, considered raising strong, confident children as a national duty: “il nostro paese ha d’uopo di caratteri e di corpi di bronzo. Quale vantaggio per la nazione e per l’umanità d’un meticoloso o d’un tiscuzzo, che [...] ad ogni piccola tempesta della vita necessita della alleanza della medicina e della farmacia?” [our country needs firm characters and bodies. What good to the nation and humankind would a fearful or consumptive boy be, who [...] needs doctors and medicines at every turn?] (187–88). It seemed, in short, that to increase the state’s wealth and ensure its dominance through physical power, nations could not afford weak bodies; so malnutrition, and by association malnourished bodies, became an issue.

2.1. THE CHILD MALNUTRITION DEBATE: MEDICINE, POLITICS, AND THE “SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST”

Within the scope of this article, I propose to look at the conversation about child malnutrition developed in this period as articulated into two strands: on the one hand, the medical strand, represented by such positions as Dukes’s and Laura’s above, which focuses on the role nutrition played in physical development. Here doctors strove to devise the best diet to achieve the best possible results and, while the generally accepted position promoted moderation,⁶ paediatricians were against using food deprivation as a disciplining method.⁷ On the other hand, there was the debate that developed in the political sphere, exemplified in the aforementioned passages from Bertani and Gorst. Within this strand, two positions vied to influence governmental action and biopolitical practice concerning child malnutrition. Politicians invested in child welfare spoke against child malnutrition, especially among working-class children, as a social problem, a failure of society and/or government. By contrast, factions holding Social Darwinist and eugenicist positions believed in applying the concept of natural selection, and maintained that weak children were clearly meant to die; that their survival may impair the strength of the race and the nation; and therefore, allowing them to survive meant interfering with nature. The pervasiveness and vivacity of this conflict in Italy and Great Britain emerges clearly from both Gorst’s and Panizza’s texts. In his preface to Bertani’s investigation, Panizza provides a structured confutation of the argument that people endowed with “qualità inferiori” [inferior qualities] are by nature destined to extinction and thus should not be helped, lest they spoil the race (Panizza xxviii), especially when “inferior” was construed as synonym of “poor”. He notes that weak constitutions appear across the social spectrum, and that “sbarazzarsi dei meno adatti” [getting rid of the unfit] made sense for primitive societies devoted to war, but had no place in a society devoted to production, where all individuals are potential producers (Panizza xxix). Gorst chose a strikingly similar structure in his own confutation of the idea that “to save the lives of infants [...] is bad economy, and does not promote the improvement of the race” because it “interfere[s ...] with the law of natural selection, which is the survival of the fittest” (27). He underlines the absence of medical proof in support of such assertions, while stressing that a malnourished child will, in most cases, not die, but be so irredeemably impaired in their health to be unable to work, causing actual economic loss in the long run (Gorst 28).

The common element between the medical and the political strands of the conversation was the idea that child malnutrition threatened the health of the national body. While the political strand published its enquiries in dedicated political and statistical texts, medicine turned to the popular literary marketplace to disseminate knowledge on childcare, trying to impact on child mortality and child health.

⁵ Historians underline the role of social hygiene in this process, especially in constructing children and their bodies as an object of medical study. See Hendrick (13); Colombelli (588); Pogliano (594).

⁶ See, for example: in Great Britain, Pye Henry Chavasse 1968, Andrew Combe 1860, Clement Dukes 1899; in Italy, Secondo Laura 1870, Ettore Santangelo 1903. For an overview of the influence of childcare manuals on children’s diet in Victorian Britain, see Daniel (65). For an overview of the circulation of moderation discourses in post-Unification Italy via popular medical literature, see Colella (136–40).

⁷ See, for example, Combe (190); Dukes (123); Laura (170–71).

Child health literature belonged to that proliferation of popular (that is, intended for a non-specialist audience) scientific literature that emerged in Europe on the wave of the popularization of science movement. In the 1840s, medical manuals, including child health texts, became a ‘popular’ genre in Great Britain, principally among the middle class (Boehm 46). From there, the phenomenon spread throughout Europe, also reaching newly unified Italy, although there the reduced literacy rates made such texts accessible only to a small, educated elite (Govoni 67–69). This literature had a dual purpose: first, to prevent infant death by circulating the latest scientific knowledge about childcare among mothers and nurses; second, to ensure the growth and *evolution* of the child, from the pre-cultural state that was considered the mark of childhood, towards adulthood. Children, it was believed, needed protection and close observation to ensure their harmonious development with the cultural values of the society in which they were born.

The recently established discipline of paediatrics, at the same time, needed spaces in which to develop new research, and to gather more and better data. Hospitals were considered the ideal venues for this purpose, and the cities of Turin and London (where *Cuore* and *A Little Princess* are respectively set) were centres of research and other initiatives in childcare and child welfare, also due to their strategic and economic relevance. Turin, the former capital of the new Italian state, boasted several institutions devoted to the care of poor sick children—including the renowned Ospedale Infantile Regina Margherita [Queen Margherita’s Children’s Hospital] (1883), founded by Dr Secondo Laura, a leading Turin paediatrician. In London, at the heart of the British Empire, Dr Charles West founded the first British children’s hospital, Great Ormond Street (1852), which quickly became a national beacon for paediatric research (Boehm 79). Like the Regina Margherita, Great Ormond Street was founded with the intention of providing medical care for poor children. Boehm notes how both the Great Ormond Street administration and the British media framed the hospital’s healing mission as moral, as well as physical (86). Indeed, Victorian middle- and upper-class child protection discourses constructed poor children as victims of the “savagery” of working-class life, identified with violence, drinking, and gambling (Flegel 23). The purpose of institutions devoted to the protection of children was therefore that of rescuing them from such degraded environments. This was also one of the stated goals of Great Ormond Street. In his *How to Nurse Sick Children* (1854), written for aspiring Great Ormond Street nurses, West declares:

so many [sick children ...] languish in their homes; a burden to their parents who have no leisure to tend them, no means to minister to their wants. The one sick child weighs down the whole family; it keeps the father poor, the home wretched. The little one lives on in sadness, and dies in sorrow; a sorrow broken only by a strange gladness which even the mother can scarcely repress when the burden is removed, and the sick child is taken were it will be sick no more. (West 4)

A similar spirit emerges from Dr Laura’s speech at the inauguration of the Regina Margherita, when he argued for the importance of creating a space for poor sick children:

i poveri piccini infermi nei loro angusti e miseri abituri mal saprebbero aver il beneficio delle condizioni igieniche—cotanto necessarie alla emendazione ed alla guarigione delle malattie—mentre d’altra parte la singolare non fortunata condizione delle famiglie lavoratrici male si confà a cure metodiche e regolari, per quanto vi si industri il *medico* e la *madre*. Al che s’aggiunge che la povera genitrice [...] non può più adempiere agli obblighi che la vincolano al restante della famiglia [...] onde guai nuovi e col cessare dell’usato lavoro, accrescimento della attristante ed inviliente miseria.

the poor sickly ones would not benefit from appropriate hygienic conditions—so important for healing—in their small and dingy homes. Moreover, the especially hard condition of working-class families does not allow regular medical treatment, despite the *physician’s* and the *mother’s* best efforts. Furthermore, the poor mother [...] cannot perform her duties towards the rest of the family [...] which increases her troubles and, with the interruption of her employment, [their] sad and depressing poverty. (Anon. 6, author’s emphasis)

Both West and Laura insisted on the issues of unhealthy housing, depressed parents, and disempowering poverty to argue that poor sick children should be the moral and economic charge of dedicated benevolent institutions. By performing a charitable mission, however, hospitals also fulfilled their ultimate purpose: researching child disease, a goal that underpinned the foundation of both Great Ormond Street and the Regina Margherita (Boehm 81; “Storia Regina Margherita”). Hence, in the late nineteenth century, both in Italy and in Great Britain, the poor sick child became instrumental to national population improvement goals, generating new child health research and allowing the training of dedicated medical personnel.

Discourses on charity, social policies, and the health of the nation combined to fuel the conversation about the poor child’s body, which concerned their nutrition as well as their health. Simultaneously the subject of biopolitical debates, instrumental to the deployment of biopolitical practices, and the recipient of medical attention and charity, the undernourished, weak, poor child became a crucial element in the national discourse. In a climate of high sensitivity to this debate, *Cuore* and *A Little Princess* incorporated emaciated and weak children in their narratives, presenting the child reader—as well as adult readers, who purchased the texts for, and/or read them to, their children—with pathetic, uncomfortable images of hunger and poverty, to educate and sensitize them to the condition of the starving child. Their juxtapositions of well-fed and starving children reflected notions about un/ideal child bodies and health, carrying the malnutrition debate at the heart of the domestic middle-class environment of their little readers’ houses.

3. ENCOUNTERING BODIES, STARVATION, AND GENEROSITY: PORTRAYING CHILD MAL/NUTRITION IN *CUORE*’S TURIN AND *A LITTLE PRINCESS*’S LONDON

Cuore was published by the Turin firm Treves in 1886, just in time for the opening of schools. It was a carefully planned coincidence, since *Cuore*, authored by popular journalist Edmondo De Amicis, told the story of a school year from eight-year-old Enrico Bottini’s viewpoint. This book, though definitely less popular today than its contemporary, Collodi’s *Pinocchio* (1883), is considered a core text of the newly unified kingdom. It patriotically celebrated its institutions—nation, school, king, and army—and promoted the idea of encounter and cohesion among Italians from different regional and class backgrounds. In the novel, strong, well-nourished, and athletic children sit alongside weak, hungry, and sickly or disabled ones. These latter are represented by red-headed Crossi, with a dead arm hanging from his neck; Nelli, “un povero gobbo gracile e col viso smunto” [a poor little hunchback, stunted and with a pinched look] (De Amicis 15); and Precossi, a child victim of domestic violence who looks like a “malatino” [little sickly one] (De Amicis 14).⁸ All these children present the physical marks of ill health and malnutrition, and often appear as powerless victims. Among these stands out little Pietro Precossi, beaten and starved into subjection by his father and who counterpoints his speech with a distinctive “scusa, scusa” [sorry, sorry] whenever he addresses one of his classmates. Visibly underfed and often hungry, he becomes the protégé of Garrone, an older, strong classmate from a working-class family who endeavours to make sure he does not starve. Garrone’s nurturing nature also emerges in his habit of taking fruit to his sick classmates when he visits them: though not rich himself, he sees it as his duty to care for other hungry, sick children.⁹

A year later, in December 1887, another fictional child from London presents striking similarities. The story *Sara Crewe; or: What happened at Miss Minchin* was penned by beloved children’s author Frances Hodgson Burnett and serialized in the American children’s periodical *St Nicholas Magazine*. The story tells of how Sara, a rich girl born in the Indian British colonies, comes to London to receive an English education. At eleven, she plunges from heiress to destitute orphan when her father dies, leaving her penniless due to the risky investments of a friend that cost him all his money. Miss Minchin, the headmistress of the Select Seminary for Young Ladies where Sara’s father had enrolled her, turns her into scullery drudge, feeding her barely enough to survive. Sara soon becomes thin, weak, and dishevelled. One winter evening, she finds a coin

⁸ The children in *Cuore* are identified by their surnames or nicknames, rather than by their first names.

⁹ Garrone, who is about fourteen, has lost two years of school due to an illness; his remarkable physical development and strength suggest a full recovery, and his kindness towards weak and sick classmates suggest high sensitivity towards states of illness and/or suffering.

in the gutter and uses it to purchase hot buns in a bakery. However, since she is “a princess”, and princesses in fairy tales “always shared—with the populace” when they fell into reduced circumstances (Hodgson Burnett 187), she gives most of the buns to a starving beggar girl sitting on the bakery doorstep, and keeps just one for herself. *Sara Crewe* was first published in book form in 1888 by Scribner’s; then an extended version appeared in 1905 under the title *A Little Princess*. The two versions present differences, but the scene of sharing hot buns with the beggar girl remains, verbatim. Ultimately, Sara is rescued by her late father’s friend, Mr Carrisford, and she is restored to her position in society. The story ends back at the bakery, with Sara opening a bill in her name and asking the baker to use it to feed all hungry children she should happen to see outside her door. Again, a young child takes upon themselves the responsibility to feed other hungry children they meet, regardless of their circumstances at the time of the encounter.

Burnett’s *A Little Princess* has attracted attention for its portrayals of femininity and masculinity (see, for example, Kawabata; and Gruner), and especially for its prominent imperialistic and Orientalist elements (Reimer; Marzec). As for De Amicis’s *Cuore*, it has suffered from long-standing academic prejudices against its supposed hypocritical pietism, and only recently is undergoing re-evaluation through sociological analyses of its plot against its historical context (e.g. Damari; Riso). So far, their focus on children’s bodies, health, and hunger has never been explored from a medical-historical perspective, one that considers their connections to contexts that were crucial to the development of child welfare discourses and of research on child health. Ostensibly, *Cuore* and *A Little Princess* are two quite different narratives: the one is a first-person account that uses a boy’s diary as a framing device, interspersing it with stories about brave Italian children and with incursions from different members of the protagonist’s family;¹⁰ the other is the third-person narration of a Cinderella, or ‘rags-to-riches’, plot with a girl protagonist. Both texts, however, set their action at the heart of urban environments that were centres of political, social, and scientific change in their respective national contexts. The setting becomes a prism through which the novels observe characters and their relationships, providing an occasion for the simultaneous study, and subsequent comparison, of children from different social backgrounds, based on physical appearance and health conditions.

3.1. STUNTED BODIES AND FERAL HUNGER: DISTANCE FROM AND PROXIMITY TO THE HUNGRY CHILD IN THE CITY

In the two schools and cities of *Cuore* and *A Little Princess*, children living above and below the poverty line encounter each other. On the one hand, we have strong, healthy children from comfortable backgrounds: Sara in *A Little Princess*, and Derossi and Garrone in *Cuore*. These children are each beautiful in their own way and they invariably excel in physical activities; they are innately good and sympathetic, and appear mature for their age. Such physical and behavioural perfection makes the encounter with their weak, hungry, underprivileged counterparts even more startling: to this group belong Precossi in *Cuore*, and Becky the scullery drudge, Anne the beggar girl, and Sara herself, when she is reduced to poverty, in *A Little Princess*. Encounters between these groups highlight the physical, social, and psychological gulf separating a comfortable from a destitute childhood, only to question its substance with the sudden, startling proximity between children from different backgrounds. Physical description—including of bodily frames, expressions, and movements—is fundamental to this process, juxtaposing fully developed, strong bodies and personalities to stunted, weak bodies and minds so under pressure that the child becomes feral. Scared of human interaction, or insensitive to it, underprivileged children display different degrees of social awkwardness depending on how much they have suffered. Hunger is the mark of underprivileged childhood, and the hungrier children are, the further they get from the ideal quasi-adulthood that characterizes their healthy, well-fed counterparts. The narratives convey this process, representing hungry children as de-humanized and using images of animality and savagery that border on Orientalism.

Enrico describes his classmates at length, dedicating a whole chapter to his special friends and to the ones he finds most interesting. Among these are Garrone and Derossi, who are paragons of physical health for their respective social classes. Garrone, a working-class boy,

¹⁰ The frequent intrusions of other family members (especially Enrico’s father) into the boy’s diary, in the form of guilt-inducing sermons or reprimands, are possibly one of the most characteristic (and outrageous, from the perspective of present-day readers) aspects of *Cuore*.

is “il più grande e il più buono” [the biggest/oldest and kindest], as well as “il più alto e il più forte” [the tallest and strongest] of Enrico’s classmates (De Amicis 15). He is indeed “forte [come un] Toretto” [strong like a bullock] (200) and “buono come il pane” [good as bread] (292).¹¹ Derossi, the top student, is an upper middle-class boy, “grande, bello, con una gran corona di riccioli biondi” [big, beautiful, with a great crown of golden ringlets], and “grazioso” [graceful] (49). At twelve, he is already a skilled fencer, and so genuinely nice that he is friends with most of his classmates. With their big, strong bodies and good dispositions, Garrone and Derossi are two specimens of the “firm characters and bodies” Dr Laura auspicated. They also display signs of powerful vitality: Garrone “mangia sempre” [eats all the time] (De Amicis 31), especially bread, the quintessential wholesome food, which indeed represents his character. His constant need of food, paired with his great strong body, marks his adolescent state, denoting the healthy hunger typical of a growing boy. Dr Raimondo Guaita, an eminent Italian paediatrician, underscored the connection between healthy hunger and optimal growth into (manly)¹² adulthood:

I fanciulli [...] hanno bisogno di assimilare molto cibo, necessario al grande lavoro organico di aumento, che è proprio della loro età. L’uomo adulto deve mangiare e digerire bene per conservarsi in salute ed in forza, ma il fanciullo, oltre a questo bisogno, ha pur quello di aumentare, di crescere, di farsi a sua volta adulto.

Boys [...] need to assimilate much food, as requires the great organic work of growth typical of their age. Grown men must eat and digest well to keep their health and strength, but boys also need to expand, to grow, to become grown men in their turn. (85)¹³

Indeed, Enrico notes that Garrone looks as if he “pensi sempre, come un uomo” [is always thinking, like a grown man]: Garrone’s kinship with adulthood is a sign that he is thriving. Derossi is also the supreme symbol of thriving vitality, due to the charming combination of maturity and cheerfulness of his character: “[b]ello, ridente e trionfante” [beautiful, smiling and triumphant] (De Amicis 50).

These descriptions contrast sharply with that of Precossi, the only one among the poor classmates to have a dedicated chapter in Enrico’s diary. Unlike Crossi and Nelli, Precossi is not affected by physical disability; yet he is the polar opposite of Garrone and Derossi. When he introduces Precossi, Enrico describes him as

quello piccolo, smorto, che ha gli occhi buoni e tristi, e un’aria da spaventato così timido, che dice a tutti ‘Scusami’; sempre malaticcio, e che pure studia tanto. Suo padre rientra ubriaco d’acquavite, e lo batte senza un perché al mondo [...] ed egli viene a scuola coi lividi sul viso [...] Ma mai, mai che gli si possa far dire che suo padre l’ha battuto. [...] Suo padre beve, non lavora, e la famiglia patisce la fame. Quante volte il povero Precossi viene a scuola digiuno, e rosicchia di nascosto un panino che gli dà Garrone [...] Ma mai ch’egli dica: ‘Ho fame, mio padre non mi dà da mangiare’. [...] Povero Precossi!

the little pale one, with good, sad eyes and such a shy, fearful look. He always says ‘Sorry’ to everyone, and he studies so hard, though he is sickly. His father comes home drunk and beats him without reason [...] and he comes to school with his face covered in bruises. [...] But he will never, ever admit that his father beats him. [...] His father drinks, he is unemployed, and the family starves. How often does poor Precossi come to school hungry, and secretly nibbles on a roll Garrone gives him [...] But one will never catch him saying: ‘I’m hungry, my father starves me’. [...] Poor Precossi! (De Amicis 89)

The words used in this description define Precossi throughout the book: he is “sickly”, “shy”, “scared”, “pale”, “sad”. The word “smorto”, which I have translated as “pale”, literally means

11 Which carries the same meaning as ‘good as gold’ in English.

12 In Italian, all nouns are assigned a gender, and the default gender for plural nouns indicating heterogeneous groups is masculine. In the case of popular child health literature, the default gender for “child” is also always masculine (bambino/i, fanciullo/i).

13 I used here the second edition of Guaita’s text, originally published in 1899.

“as pale as a corpse” in Italian and conveys a lack of vitality that contrasts with the contagious liveliness of Garrone and Derossi. Just as they are big, strong, and confident, so Precossi is diminutive, feeble, fearful of making his voice heard, and apologetic for his own presence in the world. His wan complexion and scared look resonate with Dr Cesare Musatti’s description of children who experience domestic violence, “disgraziati fanciulli dal volto pallido e sfigurato, e dallo sguardo eternamente travolto” [wretched children with a pale, contorted face, and a constantly scared eye] (157). His stunted stature and impaired health, however, the text implies, derive from hunger: Mr Precossi cannot provide for his family, has given up hope of finding employment, and the family “starves”. Therefore, “little”—that is, stunted—Precossi is forced to live off the charity of his older classmate to survive.

The word that describes his food behaviour is significant: he does not “eat” Garrone’s roll but “secretly nibbles” at it. On the one hand, Precossi’s furtiveness attests to his need to protect his dignity and that of his family. Yet, on the other, surreptitious nibbling of food is consistent with the behaviour of wild or stray animals, ready to run and hide at the first sign of danger. Even more specifically, the word “rosicchiare”, like the English “nibbling”, describes the way rodents eat. Small, fearful, furtive, and nibbling: it is as if Precossi gradually shapeshifts before the reader until the image of a mouse emerges from the child’s body. In his study of the cultural meaning of food, Montanari argues that food is culturally charged, indeed it is itself culture (Montanari). Underpinning Montanari’s work is the idea that eating habits convey someone’s cultural affiliation, in terms of class and/or ethnicity, as well as the degree to which their behaviour is/not compatible with what is perceived as “culture” or even “human”. Starvation, combined with prolonged physical and mental suffering, is chipping away at Precossi’s humanity: it is dehumanizing him, whereby “dehumanization” means deprivation of human dignity to the point where the person, reduced to a state of mere survival, adopts behaviours outside human culture, closer to animal ones.

Meeting Precossi is harrowing for Enrico, and it is meant to be harrowing for the reader. Everything in this child frames him as a hapless victim, from his stunted and beaten body to his resemblance to a small, fearful animal, and even his name, which is an anagram of the word “percossi”, meaning “beaten”.¹⁴ Enrico opens his description by declaring that he admires the way Precossi endures hardship—hence the sympathetic, twice-repeated “poor” in the description above. Precossi is poor because his family has no money, and because he is pitiable. The two children reside in the same building; but since the Bottinis live in one of the apartments and the Precossis in the attic, middle-class Enrico is removed from Precossi’s reality of domestic violence and starvation. At school, however, proximity makes Precossi’s stunted, starved, and beaten body painfully visible. Hungry and dehumanized, Precossi’s presence is disturbing, and hints at the much more uncomfortable proximity of destitute children inhabiting Turin’s streets. Enrico’s father, in one of his many intrusions in his son’s diary, defines these children “belve perdute in un deserto” [wild beasts lost in the desert] (De Amicis 58), and depicts them as a terrifying, overwhelming, hungry multitude:

Pensa che è un orrore che in mezzo a tanti palazzi, per le vie dove passano carrozze e bambini vestiti di velluto, ci siano [...] dei bimbi che non hanno da mangiare. Non aver da mangiare, Dio mio! Dei ragazzi come te, buoni come te, intelligenti come te, che in mezzo a una grande città non han da mangiare [...].

Think of the horror: amidst so many palaces, in the streets where carriages and velvet-clad children stroll, there are [...] children who are starving. Starving, by God! Children like you, good like you, smart like you, who are starving right at the heart of a great city [...]. (De Amicis 58)

Traditionally, critics have interpreted passages such as these in *Cuore* as a display of bourgeois hypocrisy on De Amicis’s part, one that panders to the pathos inherent to disabled or destitute children but does not entail, nor indeed wishes to undertake, any concrete action to support them.¹⁵ Recently, though, Risso has challenged this view, noting De Amicis’s sensitivity to the

¹⁴ In the first draft of the novel, the name was indeed “Percossi”; it changed to Precossi in the second draft, together with other names, which became slightly less obvious in signifying a trait of their bearer. See Boero and Genovesi (91).

¹⁵ See, for example, Marini 2009. Such readings led to the coinage of the phrase “buonismo deamicisiano” [pietism à la De Amicis], a derogatory expression denoting profoundly insincere pietism, especially towards underprivileged or disabled people.

condition of malnourished, disabled, and sick children living in the cities. His interest, Risso argues, far from being voyeuristically pietistic, originates in De Amicis's commitment to promoting awareness about the condition of poor and sick children in 1880s Turin (160). I agree with Risso's reading, and I would contend that the passage above exemplifies how De Amicis uses *Cuore* to raise awareness about underprivileged children in Turin and, by extension, in Italy more widely.

Mr Bottini points out that, spiritually and intellectually, there is no difference between his own son and the "beasts" lost in the urban wilderness. Their feral condition, he suggests, is not innate: a lack of the bare necessities has reduced their life to a daily struggle for survival. De Amicis's reference to the desert is, I believe, not casual: he also wrote travel sketches about countries such as Turkey and Morocco for specialist magazines, with clear Orientalist undertones (Damari 31). In *Cuore*, by calling before the reader's eyes the Orientalist image of the desert as a remote, desolate, "savage" space inhabited by "beasts", De Amicis represents the feral Turin street children as Other. Their condition others them and deprives them of their Italianness, turning them into an incongruous patch of Orient in the fabric of the modern, industrial metropolis; but Mr Bottini suggests that, under different circumstances, these hungry children could have contributed with their good characters and intellects to the life of the city and Italy.

This idea emerges again more clearly when Enrico argues that Precossi studies so hard he could be top of the class, if only his father let him alone and provided for him (De Amicis 90). Hunger and destitution, *Cuore* implies, prevent many young Italians from developing to their full physical and intellectual potential, which is their right and should be their aim, regardless of their social class. Damari (35) and Risso (137) note the prominence in De Amicis's writing of middle-class discourses about individual self-realization through work, which for children coincided with school, and about pride in contributing to society with one's own efforts. These feral children's condition denies them the chance to fulfil themselves as individuals: instead of seamlessly integrating in the fabric of the city and the state, they suffer in plain sight and their precious potential contribution is lost. The sharp contrast between carriages and velvet—two symbols of wealth—and starvation, between comfortable urbanization and the "desert", is meant to be a wake-up call for Enrico and, through him, the young (and older) reader.

In *A Little Princess*, Sara makes some observations about the similarity between her and Becky, the seminary's little drudge, that are not unlike Mr Bottini's comment on the similarity between Enrico and Turin's poor children. When Becky, who fell asleep exhausted in Sara's bedroom, wakes up to find the wealthy young lady watching her, she is terrified: Miss Minchin is a cruel mistress, and it would be within Sara's rights to report Becky and have her thrown onto the street without the means to survive. Trying to reassure her, Sara places a hand on Becky's cheek and says: "Why [...] we are just the same—I am only a little girl like you. It's just an accident that I am not you, and you are not me!" (Hodgson Burnett 61). This is a very intimate moment of connection: touching Becky's face, Sara collapses the social and physical distance between them, making Becky real. Her words sound as if she is having a revelation: as she considers for the first time the actual entity of the difference between them, Sara finds that it is not as substantial as their respective appearances may suggest.

This is relevant as, immediately before this encounter, the narrator had depicted the children as vastly different from each other. When she finds Becky, Sara—a "slim, supple creature" with an "attractive little face" framed with glossy black hair and lovely, intense "greenish-grey" eyes (Hodgson Burnett 8)—is clad in rose-pink clothes and wreathed in flowers for her dancing lesson. Her figure conveys an impression of graceful, ethereal beauty: her dress makes her look "diaphanous" and her "skimming and flying about the room, like a large rose-coloured butterfly" during the dance brought "a brilliant, happy glow to her face" (58). Becky, instead, looks "like an ugly, stunted, worn-out little scullery drudge" (57) and a "small, dingy figure" (58). Burnett generally uses the words "small", "dingy", "little", and "stunted" to describe Becky. Mentions of stunted stature appeared in contemporary child health texts as a mark of working-class physicality, and sometimes as the consequence of rickets. In his *Management of Infancy* Dr Andrew Combe connected city-dwelling poor children's "physical[ly] infer[ior]" and "stunted" bodies to their being born to underfed mothers and to being themselves underfed and subjected to excessively hard work (29). The story Becky's body tells tallies with Combe's

portrayal of poor children: she is fourteen, “but [is] so stunted in growth that she look[s] about twelve” (Hodgson Burnett 55), and her legs are “short” (57). The narrator often comments on how Becky’s body is too weak to perform the tasks she is assigned, and Sara notes that “[h]er very eyes were hungry” (56).

Being a scullery drudge, Becky is “used to being ordered about, and scolded, and having her ears boxed” (Hodgson Burnett 60), and therefore, as with Precossi, her behaviour and body language convey fear and shyness. The first time Sara sees her, Becky is a “dingy little figure [...] stretching its neck so that its wide-open eyes might peer at [Sara]” (51). As soon as Becky realizes she has been caught staring, she is scared: she “dodged out of sight like a Jack-in-the-box and scurried back into the kitchen” (51–52). Like Precossi’s “nibbling”, Becky’s nervous “scurrying” reminds one of a fearful small rodent; her textual dehumanization, however, is greater than Precossi’s. When she can no longer endure hunger, Becky resorts to “eat[ing] crusts out of the ash-barrel” (215). The image of a child eating discarded scraps is shocking, and purposefully so. Daniel observes that “[i]n human culture [...] leftover partially eaten food scraps are generally classified as non-food” (22). Hence, the action of eating scraps is perceived as potentially polluting. I would contend that eating food scraps, substances classified as “non-food”, as an act more readily associated with animal than human food consumption, is perceived as a mark of profound degradation and dehumanization when adopted by a human. The image of Becky eating trash instantiates how *A Little Princess* represents the dehumanizing effects of hunger. Even Sara, after enduring a long period of systematic overworking and starvation as Miss Minchin’s drudge, starts changing. The change is physical—she grows “very thin” and her face looks “pale” and “pinched” (Hodgson Burnett 184)—but also psychological: she becomes “almost ravenous with hunger” (211). To her former classmate Ermengarde’s worried enquiries, she replies: “I’m so hungry now that I could almost eat *you*” (Hodgson Burnett 216). Her confession to a brutal impulse, that of committing the supreme food taboo of cannibalism, tallies with her “ravenous” state. “Ravenous” is a heavily charged word in *A Little Princess*, connected to a critical state of hunger-triggered dehumanization; indeed, this word also marks the description of the beggar girl Sara meets outside the bakery.

The girl is nameless when Sara first encounters her: the reader learns her name only when she reappears at the end of the story as Anne, the industrious, healthy, and well-fed helper of the baker. At this point, Anne has found her place in society and, together with this membership, she has acquired—or possibly re-acquired—a name. This change marks her rehumanization; prior to that, Anne is the ultimate dehumanized child. On the bakery doorstep, she appears “small” and “little”, as Becky does, and her eyes are likewise “hungry”, but also “hollow” (Hodgson Burnett 186), and she stares in front of herself “with a stupid look of suffering”, “muttering to herself” (189). Starvation has deprived Anne of her name and her childish looks, her “shock of tangled hair”, muddy bare feet, ragged clothes, and dirty skin presenting an image of profound dejection (186). She is also losing her mind, her very sense of self. Her depiction suggests regression to a feral state, an impression her reaction to Sara’s gift of the hot buns reinforces:

She snatched up the bun and began to cram it into her mouth with great wolfish bites. ‘Oh, my! Oh, my!’ Sara heard her say hoarsely, in wild delight [...] The sound in the hoarse, ravenous voice was awful. [...] The little ravening London savage was still snatching and devouring when [Sara] turned away. She was too ravenous to give thanks, even if she had ever been taught politeness—which she had not. She was only a poor little wild animal. (Hodgson Burnett 189–91)

The “snatching and devouring”, the “wild delight”, the “hoarse” voice that sounds unnerving in Sara’s ears, together with the adjective “wolfish”, build up a crescendo of abjection that culminates in the explicit comparison of Anne to an animal. By defining her as a “little ravening London savage” the narrator, like Mr Bottini in *Cuore*, stresses and intensifies the contrast inherent to the idea that savagery exists at the urban heart of the empire. Used in the context of a Victorian/Edwardian text, the word ‘savage’ is meaningful: it was the word that referred in derogatory terms to colonized populations and sustained scientific and political discourses on the superiority of the British race of colonizers over the native population, justifying their colonized state.

Various scholars have addressed racial and colonialist discourses in Burnett’s writing (for example Bakshi-Hamm; Marzec; Reimer). Burnett’s definition of Anne as a “ravening London

savage” exemplifies the process of “reinforcement” of colonialist ideology that Reimer identifies as part of the discourses informing the plot of *A Little Princess* (111–12). The label reflects British child protection discourses that borrowed from colonialist and Orientalist discourses. An eminent example is the article titled “The Child of the English Savage”, authored by Cardinal Manning and SPCC¹⁶ early spokesman Benjamin Waugh for the *Contemporary Review* in 1886 (see Flegel 23), the same year the serialized version of *A Little Princess* appeared in *St. Nicholas*. The article used the term ‘savage’ to describe the uncivilized, antisocial behaviour of abusive working-class parents.¹⁷ “Savage” Anne, ghastly and feral, with her hoarse voice, embodied the concern inherent to discourses—such as those constructed by Manning and Waugh—which maintained that a British subject could, under certain conditions, regress to the uncultured, primitive state attributed to native people in the colonies. The message was that, unless such instances were thoroughly checked and prevented, the whole British race could regress to a point at which they could turn from colonizer into colonized.

The uncertainty of Anne’s rationality adds to the unnerving feeling this child, wild with hunger, evokes. As mentioned above, together with other states perceived as deviating from the norm, madness and altered mental states were considered detrimental to the integrity of the national body. The word “ravening” in the passage clearly refers to the way Anne “crams” food in her mouth. Until the Eighteenth century, however, this word also meant “mad”, and is still used to indicate hunger-induced irrational or near-irrational states (“Ravening, adj.”). Anne’s empty gaze and her mindless muttering imply that hunger is testing her body, but also her sanity. Her return at the end of the story, once “the wild look [has] gone from her eyes” and she reappears “clean and neatly clothed”, is both significant and reassuring: Anne is “no longer a savage” (Hodgson Burnett 293). Savagery and wilderness are juxtaposed with the industrious productivity of a healthy body: the baker praises Anne for being “decent” and “well-meaning”, a great worker, well behaved, and “grateful” (293–94). All it took to make these qualities emerge, the narrative hints, was for the baker to show Anne some kindness and offer her a roof, regular meals, and an occupation. What *Cuore* states explicitly, *A Little Princess* conveys through Anne’s transformation: right from the outset, there was no real physical or moral difference between her and (wealthy) Sara. Degeneration and savagery, the story implies, happen when a child is treated inhumanely. Just as Precossi’s unachieved intellectual excellence is curbed, as Enrico bemoans, by a violent and depressing domestic environment, so Anne’s transformation shows what is lost whenever a child is forced to live in hardship—what would have been lost had Sara not attracted the baker’s attention to Anne’s plight with her generous gift.

Using a combination of animalistic and Oriental imagery, both Burnett and De Amicis present the feral child as the lowest stage of degeneration and dehumanization. It is a process of “othering” that frames hungry children as anomalies, and dangerous ones at that, because they signal the potential regression of society and of the physical body of the population. While they may not explicitly and programmatically carry colonialist or Social Darwinist messages, I would contend that these portraits reflect contemporary concerns about the “state of health” of the nation, both in the sense of average physical fitness of the population and in the broader meaning of the nation’s moral, cultural, and political power. This includes the novels’ analyses of the causes of child hunger, which they frame as an abuse which unloving parental figures perpetrate on children.

3.2. STARVING THE CHILD, THREATENING THE NATIONAL BODY

In *Cuore* and *A Little Princess*, abusive parental figures starve and dehumanize children: violent Mr Precossi fails to provide for his child, and sadistic Miss Minchin purposefully deprives Sara and Becky of their meals. The disconcerting wild children of London and Turin, by contrast, suggest a form of parental neglect so complete that children lose their (human) identity and regress to a feral state. These ineffectual parents echo respective Italian and British concerns about the impact of child malnutrition on the national body in terms of weakness, or degeneration, of the race.

As discussed above, popular medical literature in both countries warned against underfeeding children, especially as a punishment: besides being an ineffectual disciplining method, doctors

¹⁶ Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

¹⁷ Flegel underlines how the article fails to consider the possible “social or environmental” causes of domestic violence in destitute working-class contexts. “What caused the ‘English savage’ to be savage [...] was less important than describing the behavior associated with such savagery” (23).

asserted, it deprived the child of energy and prevented them from developing according to the set national physical standard. Combe, for example, though generally in favour of moderation, cautioned parents: “we must be careful not to go to the other extreme, and give an insufficient allowance of nourishing food—an error sometimes fallen into from a wish to render the child abstemious and hardy in after-life” (190). Dukes, who wrote specifically about school diets, vigorously opposed detaining children at mealtimes, calling it “a crying evil” which should “never be permitted under any circumstances”, and a “sign of the forgetfulness or the incompetence of those in authority” (123). In Italy, Laura, another advocate of moderation, criticized those parents who “per timore che i figliuoli facciano indigestioni, li nutrono scarsamente” [underfeed their children lest they should give them indigestion]; growing children, he declared, generally need large quantities of food, which the wise parent should merely take care to regulate (170–71). Musatti likewise asserted the importance of feeding children “con sufficiente alimento [...] e non con cibi guasti o poco nutrienti” [with enough food [...] which must be neither rotten, nor insubstantial] lest “scrofolo e tisi [vengano] a braccetto in casa vostra” [scrofula and tuberculosis enter your home hand-in-hand] (162). I have already noted how political inflections of the child malnutrition debate, such as the one that emerges in the writing of Bertani/Panizza and Gorst, show how discourses on malnutrition, the health of the national body, and racial degeneration converged when child undernourishment was at stake. The ‘vital force’ of a country depended on the strength of the national body. *Cuore* and *A Little Princess* resonate with these discourses, especially in their harsh portrayals of neglectful and/or cruel caretakers.

Enrico openly blames Precossi’s starvation and physical suffering on his friend’s abusive father. When Mr Precossi comes to pick up his son from school, the interaction between father and son synthesizes their relationship:

Suo padre viene qualche volta a prenderlo [...] pallido, malfermo sulle gambe, con la faccia torva, coi capelli sugli occhi e il berretto per traverso; e il povero ragazzo trema tutto quando lo vede nella strada; ma tanto gli corre incontro sorridendo, e suo padre par che non lo veda e pensi ad altro

Sometimes his father comes to pick him up from school [...] looking pale and surly, his legs shaky, his hair uncombed and his cap perched crookedly on his head; and the poor boy shivers all over when he spots him; still he runs smiling towards him, but his father seems not to notice him, as if lost in thought. (De Amicis 89)

This description follows Enrico’s half-admired, half-outraged reflections on the fact that Precossi, despite his hunger, never complains that “[his] father starves [him]” (De Amicis 89). In line with middle-class condemnation of drinking in general and working-class drinking in particular,¹⁸ *Cuore* is not interested in conjuring sympathy for Mr Precossi, and avoids discussions of why he drinks, or whether drinking is the cause of his unemployment. Instead, it focuses on the consequences of his behaviour for little Precossi’s physical and psychological health: Mr Precossi “drinks, does not work” (De Amicis 89), and his child grows hungry and stunted. This correlation between little Precossi’s feebleness and mental suffering and his father’s dependence on alcohol aligns with paediatric notions circulating around the time *Cuore* was published. Dr Antonio Giacich listed drunkenness of parents among the chief causes of child mortality: “Di cento figli di beoni, 12 nascono morti, 38 periscono poco dopo e 60 continuano una vita meschina” [Out of a hundred children of drunkard parents, 12 are stillborn, 38 die soon after birth and 60 lead a miserable life] (Giacich 6). In the world of *Cuore*, Little Pietro Precossi is clearly one of those latter sixty.

In the end, Mr Precossi is redeemed: despite his hunger and distress, little Precossi wins a medal at school. This opens Mr Precossi’s eyes to his son’s patient and industrious nature and stimulates him to give up drinking and start working again. This saves Precossi from sharing the same fate as the “wild beasts” wandering Turin’s streets. Their condition—a destitution so complete that it effaces their individuality, turning them into a nameless and faceless legion, hungry and marginalized—speaks of absent parents, or parents so powerless themselves that the child is, to all intents and purposes, an orphan.

¹⁸ In Italy, as in Great Britain, the debate on teetotalism was intense. Within the first two years of its foundation, the popular medical journal *Mamma e bambino* featured two articles on the perils of alcohol consumption in childhood (Valvassori-Peroni; Guaita, “L’alcoolismo Nei Bambini”). Children participated in the conversation too: in 1906, the children’s periodical *Il Giornalino della Domenica* featured an article titled “Acqua o vino?” [Water or wine?], showcasing several letters where children advanced their thoughts on the topic (“Acqua o vino?”).

Unlike in *Cuore*, where Precossi never mentions his hunger, young girls in *A Little Princess* are vocal about theirs. Accused of stealing food, Becky cries “I was ’ungrny enough, but ’twarn’t me” (Hodgson Burnett 214); when Sara asks if she’s hungry, Anne replies “Ain’t I jist?” (187). As with Enrico’s considerations in *Cuore*, the novel ascribes responsibility for Sara and Becky’s hunger to a caretaker: Miss Minchin. She exploits Sara and Becky for their labour and favours sadistic forms of discipline and control, including punitive starvation. Becky is clearly underfed, and Miss Minchin systematically deprives Sara of food to “break her down” (241). One evening, after months of skipped or inferior meals, Sara can barely climb the stairs to her room in the attic (204–05); afterwards, she confesses to Ermengarde that she is starving (216), and that Becky is so hungry that she eats garbage to survive (215).

Just as Precossi came close to joining the pack of beasts lost in Turin’s urban desert, so Becky and Sara’s condition is but at one remove from that of the parentless multitude of London’s street children, represented by the nameless, dehumanized “London savage” Anne. At the end of the novel, introducing the former beggar, the baker makes a point to tell Sara: “Her name’s Anne. She has no other” (Hodgson Burnett 294). Not having another name, that is, a family name, speaks volumes about Anne’s untold story. Her label of “little London savage” invites the reader to connect her to the “child of the English savage” discourse and its condemnation of parental neglect. In Anne’s case, the neglect is so profound as to lead to her almost complete annihilation: nameless and exposed, deprived of strength, volition, and human interaction, she would have likely starved to death without Sara’s intervention.

Observing Mr Precossi and Miss Minchin in the light of medical and political child malnutrition discourses, I argue that they emerge not only as unloving but as unpatriotic parental figures by those same standards: by starving the children they should nurture, they diminish their chances of becoming productive and healthy citizens, simultaneously increasing their chances of degeneration. Alongside these cruel adults, lonely, abandoned figures such as nameless Anne and Turin’s faceless hungry children hint at the threat that parental neglect poses to the health of the national body, particularly when destitution makes parents all but dead to their children and vice versa. *Cuore* and *A Little Princess* suggest that, being no-one’s children, these are everybody’s children and therefore everybody’s problem: they represent a failure of society and the state, a sign that at least a portion of the population is failing to thrive and evolve. Within a conception of the population as a ‘national *body*’, whose health must be constantly safeguarded because it is crucial to achieving political, economic, and cultural stature in the international scene, hungry (feral) children are an alarming symptom. To carry the medical analogy even further, *Cuore* and *A Little Princess* provide their own diagnosis for the symptom and suggest a cure. As these were children’s stories, and therefore ultimately didactic at their core, they propose a simple, if idealistic, solution: to feed the hungry child.

3.3. FEEDING THE HUNGRY CHILD: CHARITY AS SOLUTION

Both novels treat child hunger as a social issue, a problem that concerns the whole community. Their response to it, however, relies on individual initiative, and may appear almost naïve in its simplicity (while also failing to address the root causes of social inequality and poverty): someone should feed hungry children—indeed, anyone who could, should. So, Mr Bottini exhorts Enrico never to pass a beggar mother without giving her alms (De Amicis 58), and young Donald Carmichael, a child living on the other side of the road from Miss Minchin’s seminary, gives sixpence to an impoverished Sara as soon as he notices her destitute looks and “hungry eyes” (Hodgson Burnett 143). In *Cuore*, Enrico’s long reflection on Precossi’s plight ends with him wishing to feed his hungry classmate:

Povero Precossi! [... V]oglio fargli far merenda con me, regalargli dei libri, mettere sossopra la casa per divertirlo e riempirgli le tasche di frutta, per vederlo una volta contento, povero Precossi, che è tanto buono e ha tanto coraggio!

Poor Precossi! [...] I want him to have a snack with me, and give him books, and do my very best to amuse him and fill his pockets with fruit, to see him happy, if only just for once, poor Precossi, so good and brave! (De Amicis 90)¹⁹

19 For an analysis of charity as a bourgeois pedagogic instrument in *Cuore* and its relationship with the context of post-Unification, increasingly industrialized Turin, see Burgio (2012).

Yet it is not Enrico the one who feeds Precossi, but Garrone, who takes little Precossi under his wing, brings him food, and generally protects him inside and outside of school. When Enrico and his friends have a picnic in the countryside, and Precossi is shy and hesitates to eat, Garrone “gli ficcava in bocca il meglio della sua parte, di viva forza” [vigorously crammed in his mouth the best part of his portion] (De Amicis 293), like a mother bird would with a chick. As mentioned above, Garrone is not rich (his father is a railway worker), but his character is halfway between a pagan god of abundance and a Christian figure, great and benevolent. His pockets are always overflowing with some form of bread, and he helps heal sick classmates—including Enrico—with the gift of an orange or a tangerine (De Amicis 185; 213). Through his generosity, through his being “as good as bread”, Garrone appears bountiful even if he is not wealthy.

As previously mentioned, Sara performs a similar function in *A Little Princess*. The narrator observes that “Nature [had] made her for a giver [...] If Nature has made you for a giver, your hands are born open, and so is your heart; and though there may be times when your hands are empty, your heart is always full, and you can give things out of that” (Hodgson Burnett 74–75). This remark is prophetic: when Sara is at her lowest and hungriest, she meets Anne the beggar and, like Garrone with Precossi, she gives her the best part of her buns, despite her own hunger. Likewise, when Mr Carrisford and his Indian lascar, Ram Dass, transform Sara’s dismal attic room into a cosy bedroom,²⁰ complete with a tray of nourishing food, she immediately invites Becky to share her good fortune (234–35).

Whenever a character applies the simple solution of feeding a hungry child, there is a positive development in that child’s narrative arc. After all, even though they are technically realist narratives, these *are* children’s stories and therefore contain a vein of idealism and romanticism, combined with didacticism. Besides, *Cuore* and *A Little Princess* were both penned by middle-class authors, each actively involved in child welfare initiatives. Healthy and rosy cheeked, Becky becomes Sara’s maid; Anne becomes an industrious helper for the baker; hardworking Precossi wins a prize and redeems his father. When given the chance (that is, when a generous peer notices them and feeds them), these three children display diligent, hardworking dispositions. The message their narrative arcs carry is that caring for the hungry, forlorn part of the national body improves its overall bodily health.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In both *Cuore* and *A Little Princess*, hungry children give rise to protective instincts in other characters, prompting acts of charity that ultimately enable them to develop to their full potential. These figures are meant to trigger, I would contend, the same instincts in the reader towards real children whose condition fits the portrayals on the pages before them: poor hungry children in Turin and London. Charity and philanthropy were the essence of middle-class notions of inter-class ‘downwards’ interaction in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy and Great Britain. As contrasting views about which bodies were worth the cost of caring for were aired at governmental level, philanthropic initiatives and individual generosity were the primary means of action for people invested in assisting the overlooked parts of the national body.

Children’s literature, a genre written by middle-class authors for a middle-class audience—children *and* parents—resonated with this debate. *Cuore* and *A Little Princess*, with their detailed descriptions of stunted Becky, little Precossi, and their nameless and faceless destitute peers, tapped into interconnected discourses about child health, child malnutrition, and the strength of the national body. Both stories highlight the impact of malnutrition on poor children’s bodies. The texts detail the physical deterioration hungry children undergo, constructing hunger as an injustice, the result of neglect and abuse, and a shortcoming of society as a whole. The act of feeding, by contrast, is a charitable deed that carries the double meaning of nourishment and nurture, the administration of both physical and emotional care, whose ultimate output is a healthy, strong, productive child. While this act is usually at its most effective when performed by adults, who may have more power and greater financial means, both novels suggest that children should take responsibility for feeding their hungry peers too and attribute vast power

²⁰ Mr Carrisford, who has moved next door to Miss Minchin’s seminary, is desperately looking for Sara, his friend Captain Crewe’s long-lost daughter; Ram Dass, who sleeps in the attic, tells him about the poor little starving drudge next door, and he takes pity on her. They devise a plan to help her and support her in secret, never imagining she is the very girl they are looking for.

to the act of feeding performed by children, however socially and economically powerless they are themselves.

In line with their respective author's commitment to child welfare and child health, these texts suggest that caring for ailing and hungry children is a worthwhile effort, reflecting the discourses of political (and medical) promoters of interventions into child malnutrition. Neither story explicitly refers to Social Darwinist or eugenic ideas; however, the narrative arcs of poor and sick children who achieve health through others' charity clearly contrast with discourses about the opportunity of 'getting rid of the unfit'. The happy outcomes of Becky and Anne in *A Little Princess*, and of Precossi (who benefits by proxy from his father's renewed sobriety) in *Cuore*, imply that the health and strength of the national body depends not on systematically starving—literally and metaphorically—those bodies perceived as defective, but on creating the circumstances for them to thrive and become strong enough to do their part. Becky, Anne, and Precossi eventually find fulfilment through their incorporation into the working national body—a happy ending imbued with middle-class views, which does not contemplate an ending happier for these children than self-realization through work. Becky and Anne are not adopted as daughters by benefactors, but hired as workers by people who need their services—Becky as Sara's maid by Mr Carrisford, and Anne by the baker as her helper; and little Precossi's success is not meant to have him beat Derossi as top of the class, but to make his father rejoin the workforce. The division between those who need to work to live and those who do not is clearly marked and reinforced in the narrative: better nutrition of the underprivileged population, and the charitable initiatives deployed to achieve it, are not meant to disrupt the social order but to ensure its smooth functioning.

This comparative study has highlighted the remarkable similarity between *Cuore's* and *A Little Princess's* engagement with these debates. The ways in which these novels explore child malnutrition at both micro and macro level—that is, as individual instances of child cruelty, and as an endemic social issue—suggests that children's literature, a genre traditionally considered not particularly sophisticated because its primary audience is itself not culturally or intellectually sophisticated, did engage with debates about child malnutrition and the strength of the national body and sought to involve their readership in them. This is significant in terms of what it indicates regarding how children's literature interfaces with conversations about science, childhood, and the nation and with other literary genres involved in the same discussion.

At the time of the publication of these works, Italy and Great Britain were at vastly different stages of national maturity, and even their children's literature, as a genre, was at different stages of development, Italy again being the 'younger' nation of the pair. The similarity between representations of malnourished children and their bodies in *Cuore* and *A Little Princess*, however, suggests that their interaction with the debate on child hunger and its impact on the national body depended not on how 'old' the nation-state was, nor on the degree of sophistication the genre had reached within the country. By contrast, I argue, it appears to be tightly interwoven with how prominent the debate on child hunger was in the national context, and how it was discussed and constructed in other middle-class publications, of popular scientific and/or political scope, which addressed children's literature's secondary readers—adults. Further explorations of this interaction could lead to an expansion of our understanding of how children's literature engaged with science, beyond the scope of single texts whose authors participated in academic scientific debate (such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books). In this way, we might achieve a clearer understanding of how the genre connected with the wider literary market and contributed to circulating ideas at both national and international level.

In general, *Cuore* and *A Little Princess* are considered rather domesticated and domesticating texts. The analysis here, however, shows that the extent of their interest in the corporeal reality of child hunger and poverty in their respective contexts reveals them to be not so tame after all. While romanticized or biased middle-class views on working-class life clearly influence their representation of poverty, their portrayals of starving bodies are strikingly realistic. The texts provide details about complexion, bodily frame, state of health, physical strength, tone or sound of the character's voice, and their gaze, in order to represent the effects of hunger on the poor child's body. Through these realistic representations, the two novels ruthlessly collapse the distance between readers and the reality of hunger in their respective contexts. If the middle-class intended childhood to be a protected state free from worries, *Cuore* and *A Little Princess* sneak some quite harsh realities into the nursery. Considering the commitment to child


welfare that characterizes the writings of both Burnett and De Amicis, I would argue that the realistic representation of stunted and hungry children in the two texts aimed at sensitizing both child and adult readers. In contexts where economic and political interests vied for control over children's lives, children's literature became a platform that took the conversation to childhood level (simultaneously covertly addressing the secondary adult reader), asking which bodies were hungry, why they were so, and provoking the reader to question the fairness of the situation and wonder what role they could play in tackling it.

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